

S P E E C H
OF
JOHN C. UNDERWOOD,
AT
ALEXANDRIA, VA.,
JULY 4, 1863.

[P U B L I S H E D B Y R E Q U E S T .]

MR. MAYOR AND FELLOW-CITIZENS:

On this eighty-seventh anniversary of the Declaration of American Independence, our boastful and too prosperous country is exposed to the gaze of the nations, torn with domestic dissension, and tossed by the tempestuous passions of a protracted and as yet unyielding civil war. All around we see our neighbors and former friends, children not only of the same God but of the same earthly parents, professing the benevolent principles of the Divine Saviour, in hostile array, or with hands already reeking in each other's blood. More than a million of armed soldiers are now marching on, or making ready to march, to the deadly conflict, leaving in their track a desolated country, the ruins of towns and villages; or besieging cities in which, not only thousands of soldiers and citizens, but tender infancy and shrinking womanhood, are perishing by pestilence and famine or yielding up their lives to the more speedy and therefore more merciful ministry of cannon-shot or bursting shell. Under these solemn circumstances, let us try to improve the occasion by a calm consideration of the causes, probable continuance, and consequences of this stupendous struggle. We are all conscious that either slavery or anti-slavery was the main cause of the

war. One party tells us that the desire to extend and perpetuate our domestic slavery, was the sole cause, while the other with equal apparent sincerity, will charge the origin to the account of abolitionism, or to an uncompromising and meddling opposition to the system of slavery. On examination, however, there is little difference in these statements, for it must be admitted, that but for slavery there could not be such a thing as abolition, or organized opposition to it, as that would be opposition to a nonentity, which is simply absurd and impossible. And, besides, if the history of the past is a guide for the future, we must expect opposition to slavery as long as it shall exist. Three hundred years ago, and after the discovery of the art of printing, slavery, or feudalism, a form of slavery, was the common condition of the masses even in Europe; and the history of these three hundred years has been little else than a struggle between power and the people, finally resulting, in almost every instance, in favor of freedom and the rights and liberties of the laboring classes. Within the last half century this struggle has been more determined and decisive than ever before. With the few exceptions of Brazil, the Island Colonies of Spanish America, and our own Southern States, in every country of Europe, Asia, Africa, and America, over which the religious symbols of the cross or the crescent have prevailed, the last vestige of slavery has been obliterated. All the nations of Europe, one after another, have followed the noble example set by Great Britain nearly thirty years ago in giving freedom to fifteen millions of slaves in her East and West Indian Colonies; until the final blow was struck by Russia within the last five years, in the immediate emancipation of more than twenty millions of her people. Truly may it be said that the modern Alexander has achieved greater glory by the liberation of his serfs, than did his ancient namesake by the subjugation of the world. Who can doubt that we are soon to stand by these nations in this great transformation, leaving in the whole of Christendom only three or four millions of bondmen. At the time of the Revolution, the feeling of opposition to slavery was almost universal, and the great men of Virginia were not backward in their testimony on the subject. On the 18th day of July, 1774, nearly two years before the Declaration, a meeting of the free-holders of Fairfax County was held in this very town of Alexandria, presided over by Col. George Washington, of Mount Vernon, and a part of its proceedings, signed by its officers, was as follows: "It is the most earnest wish of America to see an entire stop forever put to the wicked, cruel, and unnatural trade in slaves."

In a letter, written in 1783, to his friend, the Marquis Lafayette, who had just given freedom to his own slaves in the French Colony of Cayenne, General Washington said : " The scheme which you propose, my dear Marquis, as a precedent to encourage the emancipation of the black people in this country from the state of bondage in which they are held, is a striking evidence of the benevolence of your heart."

In another letter, dated April 12, 1786, he said : " There is not a man living who wishes more sincerely than I do to see a plan adopted for the abolition of slavery."

It is well known that Mr. Jefferson, in writing the great Declaration to which we have just listened, added a charge against the British king, which, out of deference to the prejudices of South Carolina, was omitted—South Carolina, then as now, the champion of oppression. That omitted paragraph was in these words : " He," King George, " has waged a cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty, in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur a miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the Christian King of Great Britain. Determined to keep open a market where men should be bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or restrain this execrable commerce."

In his notes on Virginia he says : " With what execration should the statesman be loaded, who, permitting one-half the *citizens* thus to trample on the rights of the other, transforms those into despots and these into enemies."

Mr. Madison writes : " We have seen the mere distinction of color made in the most enlightened period of time a ground of the most oppressive dominion ever exercised by man over man."

Mr. Monroe said, in our State Constitutional Convention of 1829 : " We have found that *this evil has preyed upon the very vitals of the Union*, and has been prejudicial to all the States in which it has existed."

Col. George Mason, who honored a now degenerate name in this State, speaking like a prophet, said : " Every master of slaves is born a petty tyrant. They bring the judgment of Heaven on a country. As nations cannot be rewarded or punished in the next world, they must be in this. By an inevitable chain of causes and effects, Providence punishes national sins by national calamities."

Patrick Henry said : " It would rejoice my very soul that every one of my fellow-beings were emancipated. Believe me, I shall honor the Quakers for their noble efforts to abolish slavery."

John Randolph, in the debate on the Missouri Compromise, pointing his long bony finger at a Northern apologist, exclaimed : " Sir, I envy neither the heart nor the head of that man from the North who rises here to defend slavery on principle."

Henry Clay, one of Virginia's most eloquent sons, in the great senatorial debate of 1850, said : " So long as God allows the vital current to flow through my veins, I will never, never, never, by word or thought, by mind or will, aid in admitting one rood of free territory to the everlasting curse of human bondage."

Referring to this speech of Mr. Clay, Thomas H. Benton said : " That was a proud day. I could have wished that I had spoken the same words ; I speak them now, telling you they were his, and adopting them as my own."

In my school-boy days, I learned for declamation a speech of our own Patrick Henry, whose electric soul kindled the fire of freedom in the bosoms of our Revolutionary Fathers, and in whose sober judgment liberty was dearer and more valuable than life itself. You remember his earnest exclamation in our old House of Delegates : " Is life so dear or peace so sweet as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery ? Forbid it, Almighty God ! I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death." And how could any one who has been taught to accord to others that mercy and those blessings which he implores from Heaven, but desire to see perfect freedom the heritage of every being on whose form God has stamped the image of himself, and on whose forehead is inscribed the proud title of brother of the human race ?

After leaving school, one of my first visits was to that shrine, just below us on the Potomac, consecrated to freedom by the common consent of men ; and standing at the tomb of the mighty dead who slumbers at Mount Vernon, and contemplating that noble life devoted to the rights of his fellow-men, it seemed to me that the brightest jewels in the crown of his immortality were his efforts for the poor and the lowly, his assertions that he would never, unless under peculiar circumstances, purchase a slave, that the system ought to be abolished by legislative authority, and that his voice and vote should never be wanting for that purpose, and finally his last and most solemn act by his last will and testament giving freedom to all his slaves.

Thirty years ago this summer, I made my first pilgrimage to Monticello, and under the majestic oaks which stretch their branches above the grave of Jefferson, I remembered not only his great declaration "that all men are created equal," but his countless and priceless words of wisdom, asserting in terms of fervid piety and inimitable beauty that he "trembled for his country when he reflected that God is just, that his justice could not sleep forever, and that the Almighty had no attribute which could take sides with slavery."

During the same journey, I was permitted to sit at the table of James Madison, and while memory lasts I can never forget his calm, mild, but firm deprecation of the evils of slavery, which had even then blighted the fairest prospects of the eastern portion of the Old Dominion.

How different are these views from the sentiments of the politicians who have plunged our country into all the horrors of civil war, for the sole purpose of extending and perpetuating the power of human bondage! How different from the spirit of the men who carried on a war of four years in a vain attempt to curse the free territory of Kansas with the blight which has been so destructive to the best interests of our own State! Can any other cause be required to produce even such a calamitous war, than the degeneracy of our political leaders? "Oh, what a fall was there, my countrymen," when our leaders, beaten at the polls in a fair election, like the miserable politicians of the Southern Spanish American Republics took an appeal from the ballot-box to the cartridge-box, and like a set of desperate gamblers staked their whole inheritance upon the hazards of war.

But how long is this waste of blood and treasure to continue?

In my sober opinion, until the leaders of the rebellion shall be utterly overthrown; and of their overthrow I have no more doubt than I have of the rising of to-morrow's sun. Those who took the sword are to perish by the sword. Mr. Jefferson has told us, what all history and our own observation confirms, that the exercise of arbitrary power produces arrogance and pride, by which sin fell the angels; nor has man ever been able to win by it. Nor can there be found on the face of this earth a people so swollen with arrogance and unfounded self-esteem as our own slaveholding aristocracy. This war will probably continue until, under the chastenings of a kind Providence, these great and terrible evils shall be corrected. When I consider the enormity of our crimes as a nation, I am not disposed to complain that we move so slowly; on the contrary, I am thankful to God for the great prog-

ress we have made. We have almost destroyed an aristocracy as much more selfish, insolent, and oppressive than any of the aristocracies of the Old World as their power over their subjects and inferiors is more absolute and arbitrary. The great and magnanimous masses of free and educated people have become aroused, and will soon sweep the tyrants and their minions from their strongholds into utter annihilation. Let us remember how confident and exultant were the propagandists of slavery in the Kansas war, during the years '54 and '55; but how, in '56, by the rising of the friends of freedom, the tide began to turn, as it is now turning, until every obstacle was swept away. Let us check our impatience. We have a trustworthy pilot at the helm, and though the winds blow terribly, and the waves roll, and the ship of state is tossed by the violence of a most unusual tempest, our Palinurus stands calmly and firmly at his post, and will in due time, by the help of God and the tried and true men around him, bring us into the haven of peace and prosperity.

War, though a tremendous, is not the greatest of all calamities; and if this war has been ordained of Heaven to bring confusion upon its authors in the destruction of slavery and aristocracy, it will prove, like many other apparent evils, a blessing to humanity. Let us glance at a few of the compensations which, under the direction of that Providence which "maketh the wrath of men praise him," may be reasonably expected to result from this rebellion, and especially to our own State and neighborhood.

And, first, with the extinction of slavery will come the confiscation, sale, and subdivision of the old rebel plantations into farms, owned and cultivated by soldiers and other loyal men who have stood by the country in its hour of trial. And what a signal display of retributive justice shall we see in this. For has not enough loyal blood been poured out and mingled with the soil of Virginia to extinguish every rebel right and establish the most unquestionable title in the heirs of the patriots and martyrs who have fallen defending the liberties and unity of the nation? With the denser white population thus obtained will naturally come a higher civilization, free schools, universal education, arts, manufactures, and a corresponding growth of Christian morality and pure religion.

We shall be able to establish the policy of more enlightened States—that the property of the State must educate the children of the State. Who in Virginia does not know that this rebellion was the legitimate result of popular ignorance; that, as Burke said, the education of the

people is the cheapest national defence; that universal education is essential to any substantial improvements in arts, manufactures, or commerce, and especially to all the higher developments of mind and heart, which give elevation of purpose, dignity and refinement of character, and spread the kind charities and sweet amenities of Christian civilization through all the activities of social and domestic life? When we look at the educational returns of the last census and consider the immense amount of ignorance by which we are surrounded, of the vast proportion of poor children precluded by the past policy of our aristocratic rulers from the possibility of either mental or moral cultivation, we are reminded of a sad and beautiful stanza of one of England's sweetest poets :

“ Full many a gem of purest ray serene
The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear;
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.”

May we not hope that under the new order of things, with the means furnished by the tax sales and confiscation of rebel estates, we may be able to raise from the turbid waters of ignorance and obscurity some of our gems of genius, which, polished and refined by education in our future common schools, shall yet shine like diamonds in the diadem of the State?

Another great good which shall result from our present transition will be found in an increased respect for all kinds of honest labor. We should always desire the prosperity of every class of our fellow-citizens laudably employed; but the rich and powerful can take care of themselves, while the poor and humble most need protection. In statesmanship, therefore, as in morals, we never reach such a sublimity of elevation as when we stoop to lift the lowly and unfortunate. We should ever seek to improve the condition of that too often neglected class which produces the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the houses we inhabit, and all that conduces to the comfort, the convenience, and the elegancies of life—those honest, manly sons of toil, whose hands are hardened by habitual use, and whose brows are baptized by the heaven-appointed sweat of daily labor.

“ Honor to him whose sturdy arm
Swings forth the pondrous sledge,
Honor to him whose glittering axe
Cuts down the tree or hedge.

To every on who striveth
To beautify the earth,
Be praise and fame far greater
Than to those of princely birth.

Who makes a blade of grass to grow
 Where there was none before,
 Is worthier than the demigod
 Whose mantle drips with gore."

Work is worship, and we only imitate the Great Source of all things when we are actively and usefully employed. We see His working in the falling of the genial showers, in the bursting forth of vegetation, in the maturing of those fruits of His bounty which feed all animated nature, in the power which upholds the earth and sends the planets in their courses, which kindles and keeps alive those countless fires which sparkle with eternal brilliancy in the far blue arch above. And what an example of activity and untiring industry was shown in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work." What a lesson for the dandy, the effeminate, the idler, and all sorts of lazy people who act upon the principle that the world owes them a living whether they exert themselves or not. How he honored labor, fed the hungry, healed the sick, and literally went about "doing good." What a divine radiance has he thrown around the most menial employments, as our great exemplar, condescending to wash his own disciples feet, thus teaching us in the loudest possible language to welcome every labor which can add to the sum of human knowledge and human happiness.

Some of you may remember that, in 1856, for refusing to contribute to the effort then made by our aristocratic rulers to extend slavery to the free territories, and predicting that that effort would inevitably fail, my blood or banishment was demanded by those rulers, and to prevent violence, I left my home and family for a time. During my temporary exile, I enjoyed peculiar facilities for comparing the systems of slavery and freedom, and their influence upon the material, mental, and moral condition of the people. I was delighted with the culture, intelligence, education, wealth, social and domestic comfort, everywhere presented, especially in New England, that greenest and brightest spot on the earth's surface. And when I saw the countless blessings which freedom, and respect for labor, and universal education, the natural fruits of freedom, were conferring upon the free States of the nation, I became intensely anxious to see those blessings brought home to us and our children. While I never permitted the sweat of forced or unpaid toil to poison my fields, and would be as unwilling to call any man slave as to acknowledge any man master, I have not dealt in denunciation of those who have differed with me in precept or in practice. Feeling that the evils of slavery visited the master and his

family with the direst retributions, I have been rather disposed to pity than denounce.

The passion for arbitrary power in all ages has been more blind, bewildering, and deceptive than the passion for strong drink, and not less fatal and suicidal in its consequences. The orphanage and widowhood, the death and desolation, which now spread like a funeral pall over our State, are but the natural and legitimate and unavoidable consequences of indulgence of the passion of arbitrary power. These are but the judgments of Heaven, not less significant of the displeasure of the Almighty than were the plagues of Egypt, for the oppression of the children of Israel. We live in historic times, demanding no less patriotism and self-abnegation than the times of our revolutionary fathers. May we prove worthy of our distinguished ancestors. May we cultivate the spirit which enabled John Hancock, the first signer of the immortal Declaration, while writing his name so boldly that it could be read throughout the world, to say, "If the interests of the country require it, though my whole property lies in the city, and its destruction would reduce me from affluence to poverty, give the order, burn Boston to ashes."

There never was a greater or more common mistake than to suppose it necessary that we should live. On the contrary, it is absolutely necessary that we do not live long; as in that event, we should become burdens to ourselves and to society. We are but floating bubbles on the ocean of time, soon to burst and disappear from earth. The only thing really necessary for us is, that while we live, we should be faithful to truth and duty, to God and humanity, that dying, we may leave memories perfumed with such odors of industry and universal love as shall inspire with useful and benevolent activity the lives of our children, and those who are to come after us. How encouraging is the reflection, that no effort born of reverence for God, and guided by love for our kind, was ever made in vain. The martyr to humanity, to freedom or religion, may have perished at the stake, or fallen the victim of an infuriated mob; his head, severed by the tyrant's axe, may have rolled upon a bloody scaffold; his body may have rotted, and his bones be now bleaching on some battle field, where the minions of oppression have gained a temporary triumph over the defenders of truth and loyalty in our present contest. But he has not died in vain. The story of his heroic life and death shall still live to encourage and animate good men in future times. The retributive and avenging winds of heaven shall scatter his sacred ashes over the land, to become the seeds of reformation and victory.

All the signs of the times indicate that our great battles with the rebellion are over, and that we may congratulate ourselves on the prospect of a speedy triumph and a most glorious victory—a victory which shall realize the anticipations of our patriot fathers, who, in founding this Republic, expected it would be a model of just government, based upon the great ideas of Liberty, Equality, Fraternity. Though by the perversions of the past it has been a stumbling block in the way of progress to all nations, so that the citizen of the United States, when standing amid the despotisms of the Old World, has been ashamed to rebuke the oppressions around him, remembering that the dark cloud of slavery was throwing its deadly shadows over our otherwise bright and beautiful prospects. Should he venture to speak,

“Would not the indignant answer come
From turbaned Turk to fiery Russ,
Go loose your fettered slaves at home,
Then turn and ask the like of us?”

But now, when Turk and Russ have loosed the burdens of their people, and chains and manacles have fallen from the limbs of all Christendom, except only our Southern States, the Spanish Islands, and poor benighted Brazil; when within the past thirty years almost every vestige of slavery has vanished before the advancing civilization of the age, shall we alone tolerate the accursed thing in this boasted “land of the free and home of the brave?” It will be a victory which shall encourage the hearts and strengthen the hands of the friends of humanity throughout the world, when, in the clear light of our reformed and purified example, the Kossuths, and Mazzinis, the Garibaldiis, the Heckers, the Blancs, the Rolins, the Hugos, and the Schurzes, exiles for their attempts to bless with more liberal institutions their native lands—exiles, because our infidelity to the great truths of our noble Declaration of human rights, has blighted the fairest hopes of struggling nations—shall be restored to their homes, and by their wisdom and patriotism shall establish for Europe’s toiling millions the principles of republican equality, of liberty regulated by law, and the last remaining relics of despotism shall pass from Europe like ghosts at break of day, or mists before the morning sun. Oh! it will be a victory which shall make hell and tyrants howl and tremble, but the good of earth and all of heaven shout for joy—a victory far more beneficent in its consequences to the Southern than to the Northern States. The North already enjoys most of the benefits of freedom, which as yet have only dawned upon our vision. But the

coming victory of right, and truth, and freedom, shall make us one people. It shall re-populate, and re-establish, and replenish our wasted Southern country. It shall convert our wild and neglected hillsides into vineyards and gardens of beauty. It shall cover our hill tops, now frowning in primeval forests, with green pastures of bleating flocks and lowing herds. It shall drown the loud roar of our unequaled and hitherto uninterrupted water-falls, in the music of the wheel and the loom, the hammer and the anvil. It shall bring out from the bowels of our mountains the hidden coal to warm and enlighten millions of our race; to quicken into motion and activity thousands of work-shops, and rail cars, and steamboats. It shall fill all the lovely hills and valleys of Virginia, now scenes of mourning and lamentation, with the happy homes of free labor, of well rewarded industry and refinement. It shall dot our country all over with school houses, and temples of worship, from which anthems of freedom shall hereafter ascend as incense to heaven, bringing down blessings innumerable upon a grateful, a rejoicing, and regenerated land.

Let us all, then, earnestly labor and pray for the speedy coming of that good time, when the sun in his daily circuit over the Old Dominion, looking down upon a State full of free, equal, educated, independent, industrious, labor-honoring, God-revering, liberty and Union-loving people, shall never again gild the proud palace of a luxurious master, or light up the cabin of a tasked and wretched slave.

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